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SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT LESLIE MANIGAT WAITING FOR CALL

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Timothy M. Carney for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: In a meeting on October 31, former President Leslie Manigat told Charge that he is a natural consensus candidate around whom numerous parties will rally to counter what will likely be a strong showing from fellow ex-President Rene Preval. Manigat said that FUSION and OPL are strong, well organized parties, but their presidential candidates, Serge Gilles and Paul Denis respectively, are not "Presidential." He appeared content to wait for these parties to call him out of retirement. Manigat was pessimistic about electoral progress and he spoke candidly on the prospects of democracy in Haiti. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) On October 31, Manigat welcomed Charge to his palatial home/campaign headquarters in La Plaine, a suburban haven north of Port-au-Prince that has been overtaken by the ever-expanding shantytowns north and west of Cite Soleil. Manigat, who was President in 1988 for four months of the post-Duvalier era, and his wife/campaign manager, Myrlande, are aged veterans and astute observers of the Haitian political scene.

Electoral Pitfalls ---

3. (C) Manigat told Charge that the majority of Haitians do not see how elections can take place. Further, he stated that the transition will be extremely difficult for the winner, who will have to assemble a new cabinet and administration in a matter of days after the second round. He blamed the current situation on three factors: the gross incompetence of the CEP, the manipulation of the electoral process by the political class, and machinations against elections by those who profit from the anarchy. Charge replied that there are certainly those in the interim government who wish to remain in power, those in Haiti who benefit from the current legitimacy vacuum, and plenty of incompetence to go around. Nevertheless, Manigat believes that Haiti can meet the December 18 first round date, but he is worried that Haitian peasants will not make the numerous lengthy trips necessary to pick up their registration cards and vote in the two electoral rounds. He said, "clearly, election conditions will not be ideal."

4. (C) Charge asked Manigat about the State Commission on the Nationality of Candidates (CENC) and how it would affect the publication of the candidate lists. Manigat responded that this issue was only one of several which basically boiled down to one question: how to make the elections acceptable. He stated that there was a need to make the elections both psychologically and practically acceptable, saying "the population can just as easily accept a severely flawed election as condemn a perfect one. It all depends on the circumstances." In his view the key was to reduce the number of significant parties to around seven, with seven heavyweight presidential candidates, all of whom would commit to accept the results of the elections, no matter what. He stated that the acceptance of the result by major candidates would be crucial in order to nullify what he called the "absolute certainty that other, lesser candidates will cry foul."

Retire the Supreme Court ---

5. (C) Charge then asked Manigat what would be the role of the Court of Cassation (Haitian supreme court), now that the interim government had removed it from the electoral appeal process. Manigat replied that, despite the decree removing the Court of Cassation from the process, any serious appeal would inevitably wind up before the Court. Referring to a tactic of fellow post-Duvalier President Ertha Truillot, he stated that one way to avoid this would be for the President to forcibly retire three of the justices, eliminating a quorum and rendering the Court inoperative.

Haiti "Not A Democracy" ---

16. (C) On the prospect of progress in Haiti, Manigat was candid. He said that Haiti has two problems, money and a lack of democracy. According to him, Haiti is not a democracy, because Haiti has no democrats. He said, "the political class and elite are not democratic. They fraudulently manipulate the electoral process to secure power by installing their loyalists in the electoral offices and polling places." He said that the only motivation of the political class is power. He said that the Haitian people as a whole are changing, but that intolerance is still the most prevalent attitude, "Aristide or death, Duvalier or death, etc." The Charge noted that at times it seems that vengeance is the primary motivation of the political class, and Manigat agreed saying, "With 50 percent of the population illiterate, with no civic development and no education, how can Haiti be democratic?" He described Haiti as a country that ignores impending catastrophe until the absolute last minute, then improvises.

17. (C) Manigat believes that the traditional power structure still has control in Haiti, despite progressive and democratic advances of the past two decades. However, he feels that this election might be the opportunity to definitively break with the old structure of ruling elite and impoverished masses.

Preval, Simeus, Bazin, Aristide ---

18. (C) Charge asked Manigat whether he would go it alone or seek political alliances, and whether he is concerned about fellow ex-President Rene Preval. Manigat stated that he must publicly go it alone while preparing to build a coalition. He stated that Paul Denis of OPL and Serge Gilles of FUSION were not sufficiently "presidential" to win for their respective parties, and he envisioned an alliance with him atop the ballot.

19. (C) Concerning Preval, Manigat did not believe that the rest of the field would allow Preval to get to the second round. He believes that a strong anti-Preval movement exists among FUSION, OPL, the Group of 184 and others who would combine to thwart his campaign in the first round. He said that it is important that Preval not make it to the second round. However, he acknowledged that should an alliance between Preval, Bazin and Simeus emerge, it would be unstoppable. The Charge posited that Aristide might intervene to break up such an alliance, but Manigat disagreed, stating that Aristide knows his best chance for returning to Haiti lies with a Preval presidency.

110. (C) COMMENT. Manigat's candor was refreshing, if sobering. He may give himself too much credit if he thinks Paul Denis, Serge Gilles and the Group of 184 will come running to him. Independent presidential candidate Charles Henri Baker has claimed the same groups will support him. Nevertheless, Manigat enjoys favorable public opinion, and he was the second most popular politician behind Aristide in a 2004 Haitian poll. Critics say he is too old. END COMMENT.
CARNEY